

The Role of Career Academies in Education Improvement



BY ALISHA HYSLOP

ACTE Issue Briefs are designed to highlight the role of career and technical education (CTE) in a broader issue of national interest. Each brief is designed to strengthen the voice of CTE related to the specific issue and to draw more attention to CTE activities and best practices around the country. The briefs provide background information, highlight research, profile CTE programs and include numerous examples of how CTE is tied to the broader issue. Issue Briefs are designed in a concise, easy-to-read format that is ideal for use in advocacy and public awareness efforts with a variety of audiences.

One of the latest briefs is titled "The Role of Career Academies in Education Improvement." It was released in the spring of 2009 to capitalize on education reform discussions related to the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Read a condensed version of the brief below, and access the complete text, including research, case studies and examples, at www.acteonline.org/issuebriefs.aspx.

The Concerns

As economic development issues dominate policy debates around the country, it is critical that the focus on improving education and training opportunities for U.S. students does not wane. Key to the nation's economic recovery is a well-educated and skilled workforce, the foundation for business growth and innovation. Despite the attention paid to education reform in recent years, there has been no silver bullet to increasing student engagement, achievement and transition to successful post-high school education and career opportunities.

While progress has been made in some areas, it is clear that U.S. students are under-prepared to compete in the increasingly global economy. The student dropout rate has only recently been acknowledged as a significant problem. More than one million students, or 7,000 pupils each day, are not reaching graduation—only about 70 percent of students nationwide earn a diploma.¹

More jobs than ever before require some type of postsecondary education in addition to a high school diploma, but many of the U.S. students who do graduate high school have not been able to make a smooth transition to college. Twenty-eight percent of four-year postsecondary freshmen and 42 percent of their two-year postsecondary contemporaries require remedial coursework.² Only slightly more than 50 percent of students entering postsecondary education are expected to graduate—one of the lowest rates for industrialized nations.³

While there are many factors that contribute to low student achievement, one critical element is a lack of education relevance, both to students' individual lives, and to the complex and diverse workplace that has emerged from the knowledge revolution. If students are ever to graduate and meet their postsecondary and workforce aspirations, the educational disconnect and disinterest they experience must be addressed. Nearly half of indi-

viduals included in "The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts" report said that they were bored and not engaged in school.⁴

Schools today provide no context for many students who perceive educational institutions as ill-equipped to meet their learning needs. In some cases, their perceptions are correct. All too often, classrooms provide concepts and theories without the option to test and practice those ideas. Missing is relevance to concrete ideas and project- and community-based learning that can further enhance the linkages between education and students' future career and life goals, and as a result, increase overall student achievement.

Career Academies Provide Solutions

As many school reform initiatives ebb and wane, a lack of educational progress suggests a new direction and a broader

as a way to provide youth with improved educational and career opportunities⁵, career academies provide college preparatory curricula that integrate academic and CTE courses—engaging students in applied learning in a setting that requires a cohort group of students and staff working together as a team.

There is strong evidence that career academies improve student performance, and the consistent involvement of business and industry provides a critical link between student learning and workforce needs. The National Academy Foundation, which supports 529 academies in 49 states, reports that 90 percent of students enrolled in its programs graduate and 80 percent of those go on to college.⁶ Such statistics underscore the value of career academies as a relevant leverage point for today's education reform. It is time to focus efforts to reform high school education in the United States on proven strate-

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role for career and technical education (CTE) in U.S. education. Specifically, the concept of "career academies" offers ways to expand CTE's breadth and depth through a strong and growing comprehensive improvement model. Career academies provide a link between secondary CTE, strong academics, and postsecondary education. Formed 40 years ago by business and community leaders

gies like career academies. Academies can play a central role in high school improvement by integrating relevant career themes, engaging business and industry leaders in the education process, and as a result, driving academic achievement.

Integrating Relevant Career Themes

One of the reasons career academies are viewed as successful high school reform



Benefits of career academies include

a more educated and stable workforce, a greater ability to attract new business to communities, reduced dropout rates, increased graduation rates, greater earnings among graduating students, and increased readiness for college.

models is the integration of broad career themes into academic courses, across the curriculum, through contextual and project-based learning. By including math, science, language arts, social science and other academic courses under a central CTE theme ranging from finance to engineering, aerospace or medical sciences, coursework becomes more relevant and students understand why academics are necessary for post-high school life.

In career academies, all the most positive aspects of CTE can influence

academic courses through both content and pedagogy. Engaging a cohort of students in commonly scheduled classes and a team of teachers working together across subjects creates a truly integrated and personalized educational environment. Students in a construction academy might produce cement in their chemistry course to learn more about its properties, design bridges to learn physics principles, and read articles from trade publications in their English classes. Marketing academy students might study popular media's

Pedro Health Academy

At Pedro Menendez High School in St. Augustine, Florida, education comes alive for students through the exploration of medical and health careers. The Flagler Hospital Academy of Medical and Health Careers⁷ allows approximately 250 students to gain the skills and experience necessary for entry-level jobs in health care and continued education and training at the postsecondary level. Nearby Flagler Hospital provides classroom space, lab facilities and clinical opportunities such as job shadowing and internships for students, as well as externships for teachers to learn more about integrating health-related content into classroom curricula, all with a goal of

increasing the community's supply of skilled workers. Hospital staff members even teach some of the coursework.

Students have the opportunity to earn free college credit through dual enrollment at St. Johns River Community College (with some classes offered on site at the hospital), participate in Advanced Placement courses, and earn multiple industry certifications. They take courses such as allied health assisting, anatomy, health care law, and medical terminology. As an example of a truly integrated education approach, academy students in an honors English course produce a wellness newsletter called *The Fit Falcon* to apply their language arts and medical skills. Students write, edit and design the newsletter targeting their

peers. Newsletter topics have included recipes, health and fitness tips, and information on the importance of the flu vaccine. Numerous career opportunities are presented to students throughout the program, ranging from nursing assistant to radiology technician to medical doctor.

One student in the academy explained the effect of the in-depth career exploration activities, "The Pedro Health Academy has helped me in so many different ways. Since I started shadowing in the OB Department at Flagler Hospital, I have actually changed what I want to major in. I always dreamed of being a registered nurse but now I have found out that I want to be an OB/GYN doctor." □

influence on society in American history, while health care academy students learn how to calculate proper doses of medicine in Algebra.

Engaging Business and Industry

Business and industry engagement takes on a new, more intensive meaning through career academies that link the education and workforce development systems. The business community sees involvement with career academies as a path to academic and technical improvement, not just one or the other. This kind of engagement can become the engine of high school reform in communities across the country. Career academies can provide local business and industry with a steady stream of well-qualified employees.

A long-term MDRC study of career academies found that these programs produced substantial earning gains for participants. Academy students in the study averaged an 11 percent salary increase per year (\$2,088), and for young men, the increases were significantly higher and totaled almost \$30,000 over eight years through a combination of increased wages, hours worked and employment stability.⁴ These earning increases were achieved after more than 90 percent of the academy students graduated from high school, and the results were most concentrated for at-risk populations who are often hard to impact.

Conclusion

Through new and sustained investments in the career academy model, school districts and communities can reap the rewards of a school improvement model that works. At relatively little incremental cost, communities can leverage their investment in CTE and add value for students. Benefits of career academies include a more educated and stable workforce, a greater ability to attract new business to communities, reduced dropout rates, increased graduation rates, greater earnings among graduating students, and

increased readiness for college. Career academies can play a central role in high school improvement by integrating relevant career themes and engaging business and industry as leaders in the education process—resulting in the ultimate goal of increased student achievement. The career academy model is one example of CTE programming that can positively contribute to the nation's economic development and economic recovery by helping to prepare a well-educated and skilled workforce—the foundation for business growth and innovation. ■

Endnotes

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